



Gustav from Gävle

Sweden's first recording star

The architect and singer Gustav Fonandern, who was born in Gävle, was a successful recording artist on both sides of the Atlantic, but today he is almost completely forgotten.

The first time he stepped into a recording studio was in 1907 or 1908. He recorded over 250 songs, and his biggest hit — about the gypsy Emma — sold some 30,000 copies, an astonishing figure in the infancy of the phonograph.

So it's no wonder he was dubbed “Sweden's first recording star” in both *Svenska Dagbladet* and the *Stockholms-Tidningen* in 1960 when the time came to write his obituary.

But although he made acclaimed appearances in both Sweden and the United States for decades, he seems now to be entirely unknown. For has anyone ever heard of the singer Gustav Fonandern?

This forgotten artist was born on the south side of Gävle in the summer of 1880 and grew up at Nedre Bergsgatan 12 in a small wooden building consisting of two rooms and a kitchen. Yes, one of the rooms was in reality only a small partition wall behind the stove in the kitchen.



Gästrikland native Olga Lindgren and her husband Hjalmar Peterson, better known as Olle i Skratthult, performed together with Gustav Fonandern in the United States for many years.

At that time he was called Pettersson, and his father worked at the Porter Brewery down by Holy Trinity Church. After a few years at the Civic School, Fonandern found employment selling men's clothing on Drottninggatan and subsequently at one of the city's collection agencies.

He took evening classes in drawing and architectural drawing and then moved to Stockholm, where he began studying architecture at the Royal Institute of Technology. During his time as a student he sang for a circle of friends. When one evening he appeared quite spontaneously at Strömparterren nightclub, he was met with rousing applause. Inspired by his success, he started taking singing lessons from the famous singer and opera director John Forssell, but an opera singer he never became. Fonandern developed instead into a musical jack-of-all-trades with arias,

ballads, romances, couplets, popular songs and sailor songs in his repertoire.

Even as the young architect's beautiful voice was heard on raspy phonographs, he traveled around to Swedish folk parks and toured neighboring countries as well as Germany, France, Poland, Holland and England.

In London he performed in a cabaret led by Strindberg's former wife Siri von Essen. In Stockholm he sang with Ernst Rolf at Berns and with Calle Brisson at Mosebacke. It is said that he was in a sound film shot in Vienna, but this information may not be reliable.

As a new architect Gustav Fonandern worked in a draftsman's office in Sundsvall. After further training in England and Germany, he returned to Gävle where he ran his own architectural firm throughout most of the 1910s. It stood at Spinnhusgränd 7, near the location of the current police station.

During a folk park tour in Sweden Gustav Fonandern met the Swedish-American comedian Olle i Skratthult, who persuaded him to come to the United States. Olle, whose real name was Hjalmar Peterson, had moved to America at the beginning of the century and become the leader of a theater company that traveled from coast to coast entertaining Scandinavian immigrants.

Fonandern joined Olle for several of his year-long tours. He often chose songs from Ernst Rolf's repertoire but also included a long list of his own compositions.

In 1920 he became the first Swede to sing on American radio in Duluth, Minnesota.

The star of the troupe was otherwise Olle's wife, Olga Lindgren. She was born in Norrsundet, Gästrikland in 1896 and emigrated to America at the age of 17. Olga was very much appreciated by her countrymen in the United States, especially when she sang the tearful "Barndomshemmet" (My Childhood Home), which became something of a Swedish-American national anthem.

When Gustav Fonandern was not on tour with Olle i Skratthult or in the Columbia recording studios in New York, he worked as an architect in Chicago and other cities. In addition to buildings in California and Florida, he designed 150 houses and a large hotel on Long Island outside of New York.

He remained in the United States for six years and returned to Sweden with a large automobile that he drove on tour well into the 1930s. Among other things he went to Gävle and participated in several of its popular summer festivals. Touring by car was considered so remarkable that his posters would announce that he was arriving in his own vehicle.

Gustav Fonandern belonged to several fraternal societies and other groups in Sweden and the United States. He was keenly interested in the welfare of needy artists and co-founded an association that for many years provided them with vacation homes.

Despite his great success as an entertainer, Fonandern never put away the drafting pen for good. In the early 1930s he founded another architectural firm, this time on Drottninggatan in Stockholm. And after twenty years as a performer, he still had difficulty deciding whether he was an architect or a singer.

— Ulf Ivar Nilsson
Arbetarbladet September 6, 2009

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The author's assertion that Olle i Skratthult met Gustav Fonandern in Sweden and toured with him in America is not based on any credible evidence although such a narrative has appeared at online sites, which do not cite their sources.

In 1953 the Swedish weekly *Såningsmannen* published a two-page interview with Fonandern concerning his performing career. In talking about his American tours he made no reference to Olle i Skratthult.

When Olga Lindgren - Nilsen was interviewed for the 1981 LP "From Sweden To America", she did not mention ever meeting Fonandern.

The Swedish American Newspapers archive at the Minnesota Historical Society has hundreds of online advertisements and articles about Gustav Fonandern and Olle i Skratthult for the years 1921 – 1926, but no accounts of Fonandern appearing with Skratthult have been found. The only pages with both men's names have advertisements for their 78 rpm records.